CAPTAIN GEORGE'S

Penny Dreadful

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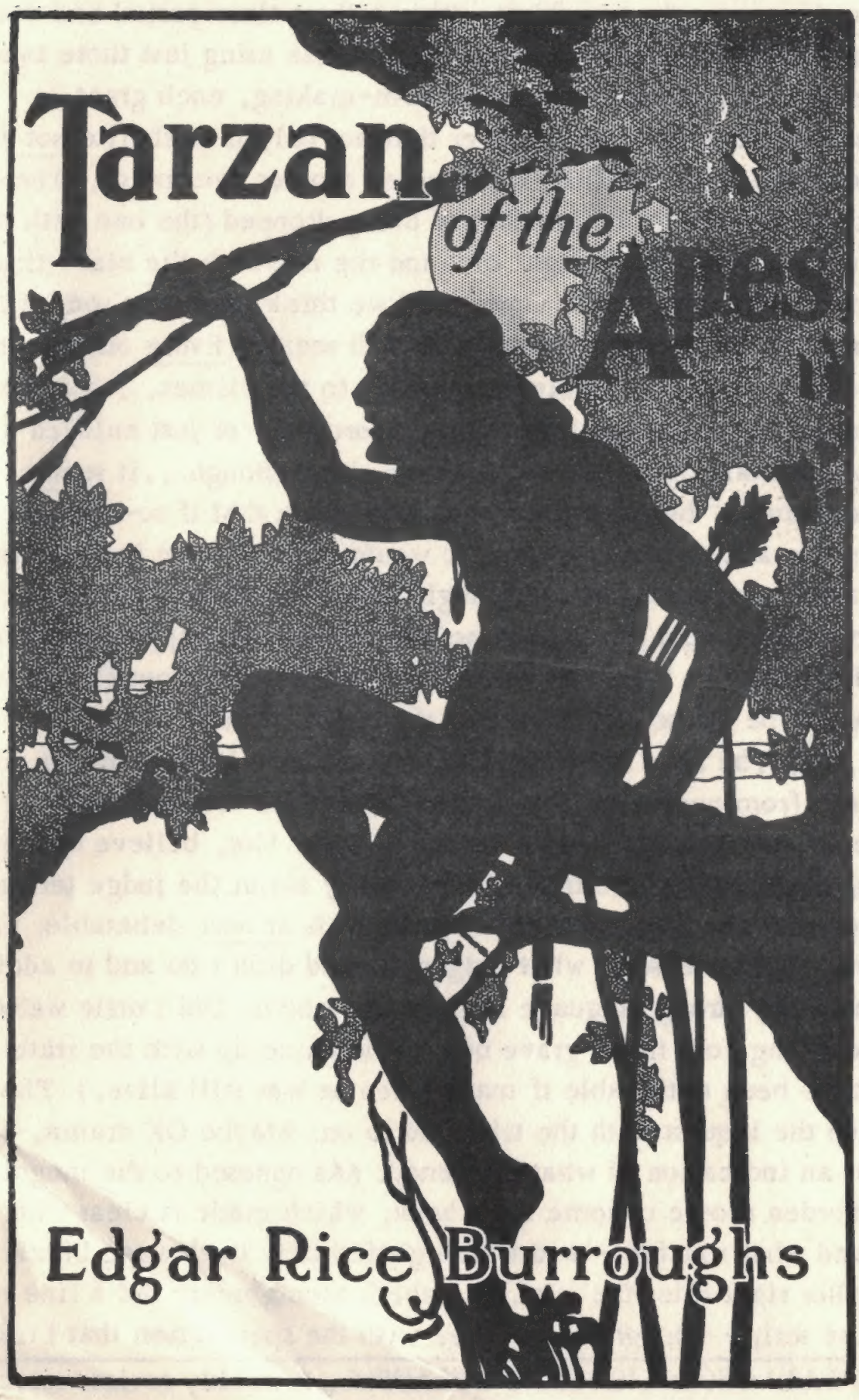

A WEEKLY REVIEW

WE GET LETTERS

Maggie Thompson of Mentor, Ohio, sends along the following comments on the Feb. 6 issue of the Penny Dreadful:

We'll have to keep an eye out for Smile and W.W. And The Dixie Dancekings--neither of which we saw on their first time in this area. (Previews for the latter were not exactly compelling.) However, we seriously wonder how many times Don Miller saw Nashville; it's a film absolutely designed to be seen for the second time. (Jaws is designed to be seen for the first time, on the other hand; we saw the two films within a short time period and decided that you could teach an absolutely great film course using just those two movies as subjects--two very different types of film-making, each great.)

On second viewing, you discover that not only is Nashville not formless, it is one of the most carefully constructed movies ever made. There are two sequences which might be capable of being dropped (the one with the short and tall women singing in the night spot and the one with the black singer doing his number at the Grand Ole Opry--and we think there was some important business going on during the course of each scene). Every other sequence contributes to the plot, leading inevitably to the climax. It's a film that can be discussed in multisyllabled, boring dissection--or just enjoyed as a diverting piece of entertainment. No way is it formless, though...It seems to have "loose structure," but if you study it, you'll see that if so-and-so hadn't been in this place at this time, so-and-so wouldn't have been in that place at that time--and so on. Even such seemingly non-contributing scenes as Geraldine Chaplin at the school bus yard shows something else happening without which the ending couldn't have happened. A fantastic jigsaw puzzle, in which every piece has to be in the right place or there's no picture...

And, uh, The Sam Sheppard Murder Case may have made for fun viewing, but take it from people who live near Cleveland, the script did not "include everything, pro and anti" about good old Sam. Nor, believe us, did it show what happened during the trial. (That turkey about the judge telling Dorothy Kilgallen that Dr. Sam was "guilty as hell" is at best debatable; the judge had a very strong sense of what judges did and didn't do and in addition he never used any strong language in front of women. Old Dottie waited till the judge was long cold in his grave before she came up with the statement, which would have been actionable if made when he was still alive.) The TV show mixed up the inquest with the trial and so on. Maybe OK drama, but not to be taken as an indication of what happened. (As opposed to the magnificent Lizzie Borden movie of some time back, which made it clear what was speculation and what was fact--and which goofed only in showing Lizzie's sister leaving her right after the trial. Elizabeth Montgomery did a fine job acting out a fine script--though we disagree with the speculation that Lizzie did it.)

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GUEST COLUMN

BY JOHN MATTHEW

Recently I've been working my way through all the Sherlock Holmes stories and long novels again, though I've yet to find a copy of His Last Bow. This naturally led to reading four of a new set of six paperbacks covering all the late August Derleth's Solar Pons pastiches, which are far better than those by Adrian Conan Doyle and John Dickson Carr.

Then, I found a curious book...the paperback edition of Samuel Rosenberg's Naked Is The Best Disguise--The Death & Resurrection Of Sherlock Holmes, in Penguin Books. This is NOT another of those interminable books trying to fill in Sherlock's adventures in the real world, but rather an intriguing attempt to prove that Doyle embellished the stories with characters' names which give decided clues to various real personalities of his times. Rosenberg was at one time working at Warner Brothers trying to determine whether scripts they received were plagiarised from other people, or if in fact any two in contention had a common literary source that would negate any projected litigation. He is obviously a well-read man and he turns up direct passages where Doyle had cribbed from authors he had read prior to writing the Holmes stories. Also there are disquieting allusions to repressed sexuality lurking in the background.

However, Rosenberg in one passage of his book makes me think that either he got carried away by the case he was setting up, or else he ascribed someone else's words to Doyle. The reference is to a villain in the second Holmes story of 1892, The Red Headed League. He mentions about the character he travels with "a beskirted gunsel." But, in Doyle's actual story, the reference to skirts is clearly to coat tails and the word gunsel does NOT appear at all. I have not yet had a chance to look the story up in the two-volume set of The Annotated Sherlock Holmes by Baring-Gould, which Rosenberg obviously also consulted. But the word gunsel rang a bell with me and I immediately leafed back through my recent Penny Dreadfuls to find the piece by Pete Harris in #350.

Pete ascribed the most famous use of this term to Dashiell Hammett in his Maltese Falcon and noted that he was forever trying to slip off-colour words past magazine editors. Pete intimated too that the word doesn't necessarily mean gunman. Well, I wonder! My first thought was to consult the amazing micro-printed-on-onionskin-paper set which claims to condense the entire 14-shelf-filling volumes of the Revised Oxford Dictionary into two chunky volumes. Nothing! Which reinforced my belief that the word was in fact a bona-fide American slang term. Sure enough, there it is in my paperback edition of The Pocket Dictionary Of American Slang. The word comes from German or Yiddish (ganzel or gantzel=gosling) and since 1915 it was used in prisons in the U.S. or by hobos to refer to an inexperienced youngster who might be sexually victimised by an older man. Since 1925, in the underworld, it came to refer to a sly treacherous character and thirdly to a thief or criminal. So now we now. Need one add...what a remarkable adjunct to education is the Penny Dreadful!

PETE HARRIS

THE BOOKSHELF: Denis Gifford, whom I mentioned last week in connection with a comics convention being held this month in London, England, seems to have become a one-man nostalgia industry. Among his many works are the monumental British Film Catalogue 1895-1970, Test Your N.Q. (Nostalgia Quotient), British Cinema, Pictorial History Of Horror Movies, Karloff: The Man, The Monster, The Movies and so on. He's also connected with a radio series called Sounds Familiar and a TV show called Looks Familiar. Gadzooks, he's the Pierre Berton of the British Isles.

Anyway, the latest product of the Gifford Nostalgia Factory is Run, Adolf, Run (Corgi, $5.95), a profusely illustrated scrapbook, much of it in color, of British memorabilia from the 1939-45 period. Included is sheet music (in fact, the book's title comes from wartime lyrics added to a 1939 show tune called Run, Rabbit, Run), cartoons, posters, magazine covers, comics, ads, every conceivable type of paper nostalgia from that era of the 20th century that was, if you lived through it, simultaneously the most frightening and most exciting time of our lives.

I should warn nostalgia buffs who snap up everything in sight that Run, Adolf, Run isn't everybody's cup of tea. I happen to have enjoyed it because, during World War II, I as a Canadian had a certain awareness of the British entertainment scene, what with George Formby movies, and Gracie Fields of course, plus those eye-straining copies of Triumph (with Mad Carew) and Champion magazines, among other things.

At any rate, that's the latest from Gifford Unlimited. I wonder what he's got coming out next week.

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TEEVEE STUFF: This is absolutely my last word on the Bonanza-Maverick situation on ch. 5. Some time ago I mentioned that it was a drag having to wait until 1 a.m. for reruns of the old Maverick series, especially since reruns of Bananaz or Ponderous or whatever were on at midnight. Well, the next stage in our little saga involved moving Maverick to midnight Thursday and leaving Bonzosera at midnight Tuesday. The move wiped out the Thursday night movie, but, what the hell! This week, we're back to Square One--CBLT, ch. 5, is running Pondanza at midnight Thursdays, followed by Maverick at 1 a.m. Good night!

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COMICS STUFF: It's an instant collector's item, of course, but I was a little disappointed in the DC-Marvel Superman-Spiderman team-up from the standpoint of artwork. I have nothing against Ross Andru, who did the drawing, and Dick Giordano, who did the inking; some of their panels can only be described as terrific. But, there's a certain flatness to most of the book that doesn't do justice to such a historic occasion in the world of comics.